

Gallery puts Old Glory in a new light

By Kurt Shaw

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Sunday, January 27, 2002

It's funny how things come around. This past summer, it seemed the fashion trend was to have something with an American flag on it. On everything from T-shirts to rhinestone belt buckles, Old Glory was back in style, riding the crest of the wave that was a resurgent interest in '70s fashion.

It was like the bicentennial all over again, or so it seemed. Then came Sept. 11, and the American flag took on new meaning — again.

For all it has stood for in more than 200 years, the flag still is an object of beauty. A graphic symbol that says so much with so little — its stars and stripes, its red, white and blue.

Last summer, before Sept. 11, the Three Rivers Arts Festival Gallery's current exhibition, "To The Flag: Taking Liberties," was in the planning stages. But afterward, like the American flag, the exhibition took on new meaning as well.

Originally, the idea for this exhibition grew out of the interest guest curator Kimberly Marrero of Suzanne Randolph Fine Arts in New York City had in the photographs of Edward Mapplethorpe, brother and studio assistant to the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

Robert Mapplethorpe, it seems, coveted a small collection of American flags that Edward inherited and later photographed in 1994. "He wanted to photograph them as objects of art," Marrero says, "not so much as a symbol of patriotism or our nation."

Six of those photographs are in this show, and although they were the impetus for this exhibition, Marrero eventually included the work of nine more artists, bringing the total number of pieces to 19.

Having been made between 1948 and 2001, all of the pieces were created before Sept. 11, with the exception of one. Otherwise, each piece was created with different intentions, but in light of current events, they, too, take on new meaning.

At 6 1/2 by 10 feet, Sam Messer's painting "Enough" is the largest example of this. It depicts a frustrated Uncle Sam pulling his hair and jittering in front of a

wavy flag and is undoubtedly more poignant now than when it was painted in 1995.

Other newly energized works include three urns from 2000 by ceramist Ilona Granet that incorporate flags and fighter jets. Looking more like Wedgwood than anything else, these cool pastel urns with white bas-relief war motifs speak of the antiseptic nature of modern warfare.

"You wince when you take another look," Marrero says. "She's using everyday objects. She's using urns that you would see in someone's home. Relaxes your eyes. Relaxes your demeanor. And then, upon second look, you realize that there is a very powerful political statement that is happening."

Other pieces make you look twice. For example, Donald Lipski's "Untitled Jig-saw Puzzle" (1996), in which the artist has removed the printed layer of every other piece of an American flag puzzle, is full of connotations that can have many interpretations in light of current events.

Likewise, pieces by William Stone, Andy Warhol and Warhol's assistant Edward Wallowitch.

The one piece that has been altered after Sept. 11 is "Amer-o-matic" by Brooklyn artist Steve Gerberich. Originally, the piece was intended to be a tribute to New York City, but now, with the inclusion of various artifacts collected from Ground Zero, the mixed-media work built out of an Art Deco wardrobe has become a shrine that pays homage to the rescue workers, some of whom are friends of the artist.

"This is the one artist who changed his work," Marrero says. "He felt very strongly that he could not do a piece about New York and not express himself about how he feels about the tragedy of Sept. 11."

Another Brooklyn artist included in the show is David Kramer, who suffered through a tragedy of his own three weeks before the opening of this exhibition when his studio exploded due to a gas leak. Everything was destroyed except for his 1998 piece, "The Center of the Known Universe," a 9- by 5-foot outline of the continental United States made of sheet steel and fitted with red and white light bulbs that was slated for this show prior to the accident.

"Every bulb was blown, but the piece itself was standing in the midst of an entire burned-out Brooklyn studio," Marrero says. "We both thought this has to be in the show. This is everything about what the show is about; so here it is, resolve at its best."

And perhaps the most fitting tribute to the survival of the American flag is a proud portrait of a torn and tattered flag glowing in the sun by Robert Mapplethorpe (1977). It is a comforting reminder that, although we may pass,

our flag will still be there.

'To The Flag: Taking Liberties'

- Through March 31. Hours: noon to 5 p.m. Mondays through Wednesdays; noon to 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday.
- Three Rivers Arts Festival Gallery, 707 Penn Ave., Downtown.
- (412) 281-8723.

Kurt Shaw can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com or .

Images and text copyright © 2010 by Trib Total Media, Inc.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent.